TRANSCRIPT—JERI JOHNSON MCKESSON

Interviewee: Jeri Johnson McKesson

Interviewer: Zoe Rhine

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Transcriber: Alice Helms

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Zoe Rhine: So Jeri, could you tell me your full name including your maiden name.

Jeri Johnson: Yes, my name is Jeri Johnson McKesson.

ZR: Spell your last name.

JJ: M-C-K-E-S-S-O-N.

ZR: McKesson. And your parents' full names.

JJ: My parents are Hattie and Jerry Johnson. Jerry and Hattie Johnson.

ZR: And Hattie's maiden name?

JJ: White.

ZR: Were you born in Asheville?

JJ: No, I was born in Tuskegee, Alabama. In 1950. I had the opportunity to witness many of the contributors as integration began. I was fortunate enough to see Jackie Robinson, who came to Tuskegee to speak and I remember so well his message. He stated that he went to Japan to play baseball and it was pouring down rain but the Japanese refused to go in and they sat there in the rain to see him play. I had the opportunity to attend commencement exercises at Tuskegee Institute, now Tuskegee University, and I witnessed Martin Luther King speaking at the commencement exercises. Mid-fifties, I can't recall the exact year, however we went to Montgomery to shop and we began to notice a lot of cars and people gathering and it was the day Rosa Parks refused to go to the back of the bus. So as time went on, my father passed away and my grandfather passed away. My grandparents lived here in Asheville. My mother, the only girl with five brothers, the brothers asked her if she would return to Asheville to care for my grandmother. Her health was declining. Having gone through the integration—I would like to back up a bit. The school that I went to was a semi-private school and a part of Tuskegee Institute. Upon moving here—I had visited Asheville in the summer months however being a permanent resident here contributed to many and much adjustments. As time went on I attended—.

ZR: What's your grandmother's name?

JJ: My grandmother's name was Catherine White Lynch. As time went on, with the integration that was happening around the area, my mother having been raised in Tuskegee, we had somewhat of a phobia about my attending an integrated school. So I asked if I could please remain at Stephens-Lee.

ZR: What year did you move to Asheville?

JJ: We moved to Asheville in 1962.

ZR: And what school did you go to?

JJ: I attended Shiloh Elementary. And after graduating, from the eighth grade in those days, we were the last freshman class to enter here at the Castle on the Hill, Stephens-Lee High School. As I said, having experienced integration problems, my mother did give me the opportunity to remain in the Asheville City School system and from Stephens-Lee, the last freshman class, we moved to South French Broad and I graduated from South French Broad in 1968. Mrs. Ollie Reynolds was very instrumental because transportation was not provided for the last two years of high school. I had Mrs. Reynolds pick me up in the morning and in the afternoons if my mother could pick me up she did and if not, I used the Asheville Transit Authority.

ZR: So your family, were they living in the Shiloh area?

JJ: Yes. On White Avenue.

ZR: I don’t know Shiloh.

JJ: Do you know West Chapel Road?

ZR: Yes, I know West Chapel. I keep trying to find it when I happen to be in the Sweeten Creek area and I somehow miss it every time. So I’m just not taking the right road.

JJ: Are you from this area?

ZR: I moved here in ’76 and I had relatives here too so I knew it. Your mother was working here when she came back to Asheville?

JJ: She returned to Asheville, she received the benefits of being a widow of a retired military, the Navy.

ZR: Your experiences at South French Broad—.

JJ: They were all positive. We had a great team of teachers and principals. Our principal here, Mr. Belton, retired and Mr. Holtzclaw replaced him.

ZR: I wondered how to say his name.

JJ: That’s the way I pronounce it.

ZR: Any specific teachers you remember highly?

JJ: Mrs. Forney, Mrs. Foster, Mrs. Eubanks. Mr. Cunningham, who still resides in the Asheville area, Art instructor. Mr. Cowan, Math teacher. Mr. Lennon, Band Director and Civics instructor.

ZR: You don’t have quite the same history with Stephens-Lee that a lot of other people I’ve talked to since you didn’t grow up in Asheville but do you have anything to say about how the faculty made a difference in your life or influenced—?

JJ: That was a great team. Along with our Home Economics teacher Miss Burton, Sociology and Economics instructor Miss Gladys Pierce Forney.

ZR: She went on to have a lot to do with integration at the high school.

JJ: Yes, she was very active and supportive of programs that were in place.

ZR: I'm glad we had her.

JJ: We appreciate her very much.

ZR: What did you do after you graduated?

JJ: After I graduated from high school at South French Broad in 1968, I attended Durham College in Durham, North Carolina and I was employed at Duke University for several years and I returned to Asheville and was employed with then at the time Carolina Power and Light Company which is now Duke Energy. I'm happy to say I retired from—then it was Progress Energy when I retired in the nineties. I had the opportunity to serve in the U.S. Military Army Reserves for thirty-one and a half years.

ZR: Did you get to travel while you were—.

JJ: Quite a bit. Fort Bragg, Fort Gordon, Fort Dix in Jersey. During Desert Storm we were mobilized in 1990 and I was away from home for a year.

ZR: One other question. We're curious about if the faculty, especially since they were aware that integration was coming, did they talk to the students about it or—.

JJ: Some of them did. All of my instructors were African-American in high school, as I said when we went to South French Broad, a Caucasian principal, Mr. Holtzclaw. The implementation was to me, seamless, and very positive. I am fortunate, I did not experience any problems. I was to attend T.C. Roberson but I'm glad that I had the opportunity to remain at South French Broad.

ZR: Did you know any people coming up behind you that did go into the first year or two at Asheville High as it was being integrated?

JJ: I do. I recall being watching television when I was in Durham at Durham College and seeing the news that they did experience problems back in 1970 I believe.

ZR: One of them. I believe there were a couple others but that was the first. Anything else you'd like to say?

JJ: I'd like to say thank you very much for this opportunity and I do hope you find my information to be of value.

ZR: Very much so. Thank you. I appreciate it.

END OF INTERVIEW.